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# Proving Yourself: How Top Executives Relate Their Leadership Experience

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## **Proving Yourself: How Top Executives Relate Their Leadership Experience**

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## **Proving Yourself: How Top Executives Relate Their Leadership Experience**

We asked 30 top executives (CEOs, COOs, and Presidents) to describe their paths to and in office. Our purpose was to explore how executives practice leadership in the way they discuss their experience. We identified three structures that interviewees used: the full proof, a thesis statement backed by evidence; the narrative plot, a trajectory towards a goal; and the signature story, a defining leadership experience. We argue that structuration proves leadership; that is, full proofs and narrative plots communicate dependability and signature stories convey realism. We also constructed paradigmatic narratives (Linde, 2009) or representative experiences of leadership, which suggest an experiential curriculum of leadership. Our findings show ways of working with experience in order to communicate leadership.

Key words: leadership, communication, experience, narrative, CEOs

The emerging research agenda of discursive leadership focuses on communicative practices, particularly interactive processes and their impacts on stakeholders (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2017; Walker & Aritz, 2014).

“Leadership is exercised when thoughts expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them” (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017: 4 citing Robinson, 2001: 93). This perspective emphasizes that leadership hinges on recognition by others. This view is consistent with classic leadership theory (Barnard, 1968 [1938]: 163-165). Leadership communication research has examined how leaders use talk in evaluating performance, determining strategy, and resolving conflicts (Argenti, 2017; Gadiesh & Gilbert, 2001) as well as in creating meaning (Podolny, Khurana, & Hill-Popper, 2005; Walker & Aritz, 2014). This research stream focuses on how leaders communicate in order to serve organizational purposes. But the discursive leadership research agenda suggests that understanding how executives present themselves and elicit judgments as to their worthiness as leaders is of equal if not more importance. How do leaders show leadership in the way they speak about themselves as leaders?

### **Literature Review and Contribution**

In addition to the field of discursive leadership, this study is grounded in the experiential leadership and narrative literatures. These work together to focus on what Linde (2009) calls “working the past.” All individuals make sense of their experience, but they do so especially when telling their life stories (Linde, 1993). Formal leadership in a top executive office compounds the challenge because of the magnified stakes and scrutiny.

Learning from experience is a key way that leaders develop (Ashford & DeRue, 2012; Klimoski & Amos, 2012; McCall, Lombardo, & Morrison, 1988). But in researching

experience, a formalization problem arises because “experience and the impact of experience are internal to the person” (Day et al., 2009: 140). Development in adulthood entails recognizing assumptions, values, and worldviews and deciding to keep or change them (Day et al., 2009: 193-201); and more generally, making meaning from one’s experience (Kegan, 1982; McCauley, DeRue, & Wellman, 2006). Self-regulatory factors such as goal orientation, self-awareness, and self-efficacy are crucial (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009: 193-201) and merit greater study (Day et al., 2009: xiii).

Organizational leadership is a specific case of experiential learning and development. Rising to a top office or founding a company and taking it to success can take the greater part of one’s adult life. The expectation is that leaders have proven themselves by taking on positions of higher responsibility and weathering storms and crises. Formal leadership entails meeting personal (cognitive, emotional, physical, ethical, etc.) and professional demands that may conflict with each other or with organizational goals, creating constant tension (Barnard, 1968 [1938: 271-276]).

Kolb’s pioneering work on experiential learning (1984) led to extensive research on leaders’ experiences (McCall et al., 1988; McCauley, DeRue, Yost, & Taylor, 2014). This stream has studied the kinds of changes that leaders experience, but it has not explored how individuals relate to and experience events, that is, what William Bridges called transitions (1980). That is, the literature asks individuals to identify defining moments, turning points, and crucibles (e.g., Dotlich, Noel, & Walker, 2004; Ensher, Nielson, & Kading, 2017; McCall et al., 1988; Quinn, 2005; Shaw, 2010; Steinbaum, 2011; Thomas, 2008; Zacks, 2006). It does not take up why or how individuals consider these events meaningful in the first place. It does not explore the events in the overall life, or as part of a sequence of events, or linked to an individual’s making

sense of his or her experience. Taking experiences out of context, the experiential learning research in leadership cannot seriously study meaning-making.

To address this gap, we draw on narrative theory, which holds that narrative is a meaning-making form and process (Bruner, 1986; Johnson, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). A life or career story, in particular, is not only a list of events but also a creative process. Meaning is created in the way that narrators join words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into stories. Concerning the sentence level, White (1981) and Prince (1994) showed that narrative creates meaning by linking factual and interpretive content. The latter category includes causal attributions, value judgments, and morals or lessons. Our analysis focuses extensively on the interpretive content because it presents the conclusions that interviewees draw from their leadership experiences. Linde showed that when individuals link events together in telling their life story, each event gains more meaning in light of the sequence of events as well as the larger whole (1993).

Prior work that comes closest to the theory, design, and methods of this study are O'Connor (2002) and Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler (2005). The former showed the importance of narrative ability for entrepreneurship. It identified a typology of narratives that entrepreneurs tell in order to found and grow companies. The latter established the importance of personal narratives in leadership. The researchers argued that when leaders tell their life stories, they justify their right to represent a company and its values. They identified a typology of stories about leader development.

We build on this work in three ways. We focused on (1) formal leaders holding the title of CEO, COO, or President; (2) the long term--their path to and in office; and (3) their explanations as to why and how they are leaders.

## **Methods**

### **Study Design and Data Collection**

We followed Gilchrest's (1992) method of key informant interviewing. This approach regards subjects as experts and aims to tap their knowledge. The interviewees were experts in knowing what experience is needed to be a top executive and in having undergone that experience.

We recruited subjects through professional networks, particularly a regional CEOs' organization and an association of women C-suite executives. At the end of each interview, we asked participants if they would suggest a referral and make the introduction. Ten participants agreed to do so. These referrals brought in an additional four subjects. Our requests for referrals became more targeted as we saw the need for greater demographic diversity. To expand the number of women executives, we included three women holding the title of president and running semi-autonomous multi-billion-dollar divisions of large corporations, and one COO. All other interviewees were CEOs and had been in office for at least 2 years. (See Appendix J for demographic data.) The interviews were conducted from the fall of 2016 through spring 2018.

We followed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process at our university. We shared our purpose statement, research questions, informed consent form, and bios with prospective interviewees.

Interviews were conducted in person at executives' offices. Our purpose was to give interviewees wide latitude in telling their stories. We asked, "Describe your path leading to as well as in office, elaborating on the experiences that have been most significant in your development as a leader." Interviewees then typically asked where to start and whether they should go back to childhood. We replied by restating or slightly reframing the question (e.g., replacing "significant" with "formative"). Interviewees then typically spoke for 20-30 minutes.

Most began with childhood and cited the influence of family, friends, and teachers. They continued chronologically, describing their first jobs, to mid-career, to the executive office. Some included personal information such as marriage and children and life crises such as the death or illness of a family member. In the remaining time, we asked for more details about past as well as more recent experiences. We captured the data using Gregg shorthand applied to keyboard typing at 200 words per minute transcribed within 24 hours including annotations as to nonverbal communication that added emphasis (intonation, facial expression, and body language). Most interviews lasted one hour and generated about 5 single-spaced pages.

### **Data Analysis**

We prepared a list all experiences that interviewees cited as formative, 153 in total. We categorized the experiences chronologically: childhood and adolescence, early adulthood, midcareer, and taking office. We broke the last group in two subparts: getting close to the office (e.g., considering an offer) and executing the office. We selected 54 experiences that interviewees said were especially important and for which they explained the significance (Appendices F-I). We call this a proof unit because the two parts work together; the evidence supported the conclusion. From these data, we identified widely shared story lines or paradigmatic narratives (Linde, 2009). (See Findings.)

Some interviewees connected the proof units to a larger narrative. We identified 14 interviews that followed a plot. The interviewees stated that they decided to become a CEO, and they explained their path as a sequence of events leading toward or taking them away from their goal. We also identified four examples of an argumentative structure whereby interviewees made an explanatory statement about their path at the outset, repeated it at multiple points in the interview, and cited supporting evidence systematically. We call this a full proof. We present



three examples (Appendices B-D). The appendices show how the interpretive content (right-hand column) explain the factual events (left column) and especially the repetition of the explanatory statement.

Four interviewees singled out one story as being extremely important; in fact, one interviewee said it was the only story that mattered in her path to leadership. They related these stories in detail and with emphasis and emotion. They repeated parts of it or referenced it at multiple points in the interview. We consider this a structuration method because interviewees stated that this one story had unique importance and they explained other experiences in light of this story. We call this a signature story. We compared the content of these stories (Appendix E) to posit the construct of a leadership coming-of-age experience (see Discussion and Conclusions).

### **Findings**

Every interviewee made at least one statement that explained his or her path in bold, encompassing terms (see Appendix A for examples). Interviewees used sweeping generalizations such as “always” and “never” to describe their behavior and motivations. They used strong verbs and modifiers, such as “loved,” “hated,” and “vowed,” in the context of work experiences. They cited “worst” and “best” times. They referred to “foundational” or essential aspects of their being or demeanor. These are decisive statements. They capture character and actions in a few words and endow them with permanence. Also, listeners (including the speakers themselves) can hold speakers to these statements.

Interviewees typically made these statements when relating formative experiences. The statements were interpretations about their leadership based on the evidence; e.g., “I grew up on a farm and there were always chores. From a young age, I developed a strong work ethic.” The implication was that this ethic has been upheld and has permanence.

## **Plots**

Fourteen interviewees stated early in the interview that becoming a CEO was a goal. They organized the sequence of events as overcoming obstacles to meet their goal. For example, an African-American woman said that she initially wanted to be CEO of her company; but as she rose up, she saw no one at the top who looked like her. She then decided that she would be CEO of a smaller company, but first she would get CEO experience by working closely with a CEO. She took a job where she reported directly to the CEO. From this experience, she decided that she needed to be in Silicon Valley. She got a C-level job with a company in San Francisco. There she met leading venture capitalists who offered her a CEO position. This interviewee also mentioned her systematic effort to find a spouse who would agree to be a stay-at-home father and start a family at a young age. She had resolved that her family life fit with her professional goal. At each step of the way, she mentioned doing research to substantiate her decisions and “beat the odds.” In a slight modification to this plot, three interviewees said that they started their careers without wanting to become CEO but decided on it as they got closer to the office. The plot structuration conveys that the leader can set a personal goal and reach it, which proves that he or she can also achieve organizational goals.

## **Full Proofs**

Four interviewees repeated one global statement throughout the interview and systematically cited supporting evidence for it. We present three examples (Appendices B-D). These statements either explain one’s actions as a leader or one’s core nature as a leader. We argue that in this structure, the proof units acquire more solidity. The repetition of the statement and the systematic presentation of supporting evidence convey permanence and reliability.

In Appendix D, the executive described her path as an upward spiral grounded in a foundational rule or formula, “breaking the fabric”: “Your parents worked in the steel mill so you could go to college.” She described this fabric extensively: (1) her community, a Midwestern town consisting of immigrants from Europe fleeing war and job-seeking migrants from the southern U.S., struggling to survive through the Depression; (2) her great-grandmother, who wanted an education but was too poor and worked as a maid; and (3) her parents—her father, a high-school football coach, died young from a heart condition, and her mother had limited work options and received lower pay than men for the same work despite raising two children on her own. The interviewee wanted to be a microbiologist and find a cure for the disease that killed her father. She got a degree in that field and worked as a lab technician, but the doctors underestimated her and she could not stand it. She quit, got an MBA, and joined the auto industry. She oversaw the construction of a new plant. Under her leadership, it became the first plant in her company to win a prestigious quality award. She asked for a promotion but was refused. She interviewed with other companies and got the promotion. She hit another ceiling and decided to leave. She got an offer for a comparable job and an offer for a promotion that entailed moving to Silicon Valley and joining an industry she did not know. She took that job.

She has broken other fabrics. She upended tradition because she, not her husband, is the breadwinner; and she disproved the idea that Silicon Valley only wants young people because she was 51 when she moved.

Although these fabrics are historical facts handed down to her, Appendix B shows how she made them her own. She plotted herself into a generational pattern of breaking the fabric that continued because at the time of the interview, she was starting over again in a new industry and environment.

In Appendix C, the CEO repeatedly used the phrase “moving to the center of action” to describe his path. He initially said it meant working on the key products for the future of the company, but subsequent references show that he used it to explain his development: “This is what propelled me.” He moved from France to the economically dominant U.S. Despite having an MBA from a top French business school, he got a second MBA at a top U.S. school. In his first job in the U.S., he started “at the bottom in sales, to learn the ropes.” He “jumped” on a territory that opened up in Silicon Valley. He wanted to get noticed in a big organization. Anticipating that a new product would not win FDA approval, he “stuck his neck out” and wrote a five-page memo three levels up to the CEO explaining how and why it would be rejected. He was given the responsibility to lead the product and succeeded. He launched a product in Europe and was promoted to do the same for the U.S. market. He joined his next company because it was the pioneer in biotech and was “extremely visible” on Wall Street. He worked on products “that would make or break the company.” He worked on cures for a leading cause of death.

In Appendix D, the CEO repeatedly referred to himself as a “home-grown” CEO who had to prove himself each day. He had started at the bottom and worked his way up but also laterally, learning every major function. He was told that he would be the next CEO. He said he argued constantly with the CEO about the need for improvements. As CEO, he upgraded the technology. He bought a nearby property and installed solar panels. He bought more property and built a sterilizing facility, which gave the company more autonomy. He instituted a compensation policy that narrowed the gap between the highest and lowest paid workers and paid everyone a living wage at the minimum. He also extended his vision far beyond his tenure by arranging to keep the company local and strong at least 20 years after he retires.

The fourth and last example of a full proof is an interviewee who described her path as a continuous process of putting herself “under their wing”—a boss, coworkers, peers, and board members. She said she chose her first job based on the person who would supervise her, who was well connected in her field. With his support, she said, she received a job offer at a leading organization. She received a series of promotions until she became CEO. Each time she recounted an upward move, she used the phrase “under their wing” to describe the supportive relationships she built in that position.

### **Signature Stories**

Four interviewees singled out one story as being extremely important (see Appendix E). They announced the story by labeling it: “This was the epiphany” or “let me tell you.” The rhythm of the interview changed; the chronological flow and straightforward listing of events stopped to take the time to tell the story in detail. In each story, the interviewee’s job or life was at stake. The focus was on individuals’ being alone; but there was mention of family members, coworkers, or clients who depended on them. The environment was hostile. In three cases, interviewees described changing their thinking to deal with the situation. The researcher said that his survival depended on his learning tolerance; the business owner realized that he had hit bottom and resolved to work his way back up; the overseas manager recognized that instead of being persecuted, she had a precious career opportunity. At the end of the story, the interviewees explained the significance: “That moment solidified my leadership because the staff knew it was a problem and nothing had been done. It is an experience I have drawn on a number of times elsewhere.” “People said that was the day I became president. ‘You had the fortitude to tell the president he was insane and you cared and you showed a lot of passion.’” “Once I had done a difficult assignment like that [overseas], there was nothing I felt I couldn’t do here [in the U.S.].

Everything else looked kind of easy.” “[I learned] that you literally do not make it if you do not get along. As an engineer, I have to figure out people quickly and get along. If I hire the right people they will do everything.” This interviewee (Appendix E, Story 4) made several references to his story at different points in the interview. Referring to the fragility of scientists’ egos, he compared running a high-technology company to getting a doctorate in psychology. A serial entrepreneur, he described several corporate near-death experiences that he had faced. He said that of ten cofounders he had worked with, six had died of cancer. He mentioned a real-time issue about dealing with gender issues and bathrooms. In the same breath, he expressed shock at having to deal with this, then acceptance of his responsibility. “It boils up to the CEO because ultimately you are responsible for anything that happens. It is very uncomfortable. I look back to Antarctica and I think, “We are not at that level. We were ready to go to blows in Antarctica. We were nose to nose. Here we are not hitting each other.” As the interview wrapped up, he mentioned that money was tight. “I cannot tell my science team, they will panic. They will not focus on their job. If you don’t buy the microscope, then they pout. The CEO sees the constraints. You cannot verbalize it to the group. They cannot deal with it. You have to parse the information.”

We observed similar past-to-present interlacing in the example of the CEO who cursed out his boss (Appendix E, Story 3). He said that he keeps this story in mind and constantly asks coworkers for ideas and input. He stated that “a couple of employees will refer back to that occasion” when talking with him. “They say, ‘You sound like Peter 30 years ago so maybe it’s time to change.’” In other words, he and his coworkers used the story to keep him, the “home-grown CEO” (Appendix D) honest and attentive. From the outset and continuously, he has defined himself as the opposite of the previous CEO--transforming the company from a laggard

to cutting-edge and world-class status. The story is not only a long-passed test but also an ongoing standard for proving himself every day.

In all four cases, interviewees endowed these experiences with the utmost personal as well as professional significance. They proved their leadership to themselves once and for all--irrevocably. The Philippines experience (Appendix E, Story 1) was so extreme that nothing at home could ever come close to it. Antarctica (Story 4) was the quintessential test for the CEO who found that arguments with mentally unstable engineers pale in comparison to physical violence in brutal and isolated settings. For the engineer (Story 3), the test was the acknowledgement by coworkers that on that day, because of his truth-telling actions and passion for the company, he became CEO. This story established a permanent standard that the CEO upheld for himself and to which others held him. The hospital CEO (Story 2) proved himself by standing up to a physician who had long held sway with the board and had long gotten away with malpractice. Executing authority over a physician is a defining challenge of hospital management (Edwards, 2003). Once the CEO proved that he could do this even under the threat of losing his own job, he passed the definitive test for leadership in his industry.

### **Paradigmatic Narratives**

We looked into the construct of a paradigmatic narrative (Linde, 2009) or a generalized model of leadership development. We drew from the exemplars or ideal types (Appendices F-I). In this section, we present and discuss proof-units that came at pivotal moments in youth, early adulthood, midcareer, and formal top leadership.

Reflecting on childhood and adolescence, interviewees referred not only to their experiences in family life and in school but also in the neighborhood and the social atmosphere. (See Appendix F.) For example, an African American man spoke of his community where he was “not

ostracized for studying” and a Frenchman attending boarding school in Africa spoke of harsh conditions leading him to see “the importance of elevating yourself from being victims of the environment.” An African-American woman spoke of the “civil rights stuff going on and strife in our world” whereby she became “a target” and faced the odds against her. Female executives mentioned growing up in families or environments where women had few or no career choices. Interviewees recalled role models, especially parents, siblings, teachers, and peers; and situations of responsibility, such as being the oldest in a large family or working in a family business. The influences could be positive and inspirational; but some were negative, such as the young woman whose father discouraged her from academics and who resolved to disprove him. School environments, particularly discipline but also the basic orientation to learning, as well as clubs and sports participation, were cited as formative. The experiences conveyed natural or inborn leadership; early interest, instruction, or immersion in leadership; and early proof of leadership in adult terms--managing a household, sports team, or business. The operative phrase here is “from an early age”: leadership was well ingrained and was that much stronger for standing the test of time.

The first job and early work experiences were pivotal (see Appendix G). Many interviewees reported strong reactions—positive and negative--towards a boss, an assignment, or a company culture. They consciously resolved to move towards or away from a particular direction. For example, after being laid off from companies that were acquired, an engineer vowed to work for himself for the rest of his life. An engineer whose company rewarded employees based on tenure decided he would only work in environments that rewarded success. An architect who worked hard to get her degree could not stand sitting at a desk “with my head down” all day.



Individuals grew in self-awareness and worldliness. They articulated a challenge of finding their place, and they expressed strong motivation to do so.

Mid-career became that search (Appendix H). Interviewees switched from a large to a small company, from a conservative to an entrepreneurial culture, from a specialist to a generalist position. They left the local area for better prospects. If they stayed in the same company, they expressed their aspirations more emphatically to more people who could help them. Particularly for those in large organizations aspiring to move up, they accumulated more diverse experience. They took lateral positions, such as the engineer who took over a struggling marketing unit and the operations manager who took a job in strategy. Several interviewees pursued Master's degrees. In relating these formative experiences, interviewees showed how they built on and tested their previously made resolutions.

Several interviewees reported major setbacks in midcareer—bankruptcy, firing, ill health. Five (four women) said they hit a ceiling. The interviewees explained these experiences as showing ability to overcome adversity and proving leadership. A few reported course corrections. An executive who had led an intrapreneurial venture inside a large corporation for many years retired, but then she took a CEO position with a startup in Silicon Valley because she wanted to “do a startup the right way.”

Concerning the formal top-leadership role (Appendix I), we broke these into two subparts: experiences of getting close to the position and experiences in office. This distinction is especially relevant for those who had long aspired to become CEO. In these cases, the mere fact of getting close to an opportunity presented its own challenge. For example, one executive said he had to call a mentor for advice as soon as he was chosen to be President, from which he

concluded that he was in direct succession. Interviewees also reported difficulty with the social position of being CEO—more eyes on them and closer if not more critical scrutiny.

Four interviewees said that immediately upon taking office, they met with financial and operational crises and situations that were much worse than they knew. They said they felt shock, but they did not express blame toward others or themselves. In a nutshell, they found skeletons in closets. The drug was put on the market despite negative test results. The investors did not disclose a lease that was bankrupting the company.

The most frequently shared experience was turning around a failing organization (12 cases). This finding supports Kanter's argument (2003) that the turnaround is the defining act of leadership. Turnarounds entail the opposite dynamics of ending one thing and beginning another. For this reason, we believe they are harder than startups. In the most complicated instance, a CEO had to resolve insolvency, employee abuse, and criminal actions. She took immediate and strong measures that provoked a strike and a unionization campaign—more crises. Moreover, turnarounds have no limits, particularly when culture change is involved. Appendix D shows a CEO who has been turning his company around from laggard to leader for 17 years.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Leaders show discursive leadership in the way they explain themselves. By embedding proof units in plots and theses, leaders convey solidity and reliability. In his classic work on executive functions, Barnard signaled the importance of dependability in leadership (1968 [1938: 274-275]). We argue that the systematic ordering of proof units into an overarching structure proves this virtue.

The signature story complements the plot and thesis. The latter two structures reduce a vast stock of experience to a phrase or formula, and the signature story focuses on one event in depth and with force. We consider that interviewees regard these events as rites of passage, and we posit the construct of a leadership coming-of-age. However, we emphasize that these are not “a-ha” moments. They endured over a period of time, most obviously in the case of the Philippines and Antarctica examples. But in the engineer’s case, he had long been fighting battles about technology with his boss; and in the hospital CEO’s case, he described a period of days and a series of escalating discussions about the intoxicated surgeon.

We also posit the construct of a paradigmatic narrative of leadership. We do not pretend that our sample is representative, but we believe our data provide sufficient grounds to hypothesize key experiences associated with life stages of youth, adulthood, midcareer, and maturity. In their explanations of the significance of events, interviewees reported strong responses—negative and positive—and firm resolve. (The words do not, and cannot, reflect the emotion that interviewees showed when discussing their most impactful experiences.) Much more research is necessary, but it is possible to envision an experiential leadership “syllabus” of experiences that executives associate with leadership. As indicated above, we would argue that turnarounds be the first entry on that list.

By presenting the exemplars in a straightforward way, we may have conveyed the impression that they are formulas for others to adopt or even that they are readily at hand. We believe conclusions along these lines would do injustice to the quantity and quality of experience, and reflection on experience, that interviewees bring to the occasion of telling their story. What we do wish to encourage, however, is the exercise of working one’s experience (Linde, 2009). Everyone, but leaders in particular, have a responsibility to articulate their experience in keeping

with their formal responsibility. We have presented exemplars not so much of formulas, but of long and active engagement with life itself.

Having made this point, we note fundamental differences in terms of agency. The plot and full-proof structures feature a self-driving agent overcoming obstacles to reach a goal, like an epic hero. This is a “push” approach. But we also mentioned an interviewee who described her path as putting herself under others’ wings, as well as the manager who was instructed that he would be the next CEO. Even the most self-centered narratives offer ample evidence that the executive’s path depended on others. We thus highlight two complementary perspectives on leadership—to be intrinsically motivated, true to oneself, have backbone, etc.; and to be seen by others as leaders. In fact, the two perspectives are mutually reinforcing: The individual won a reputation in a professional or social community, which led to introductions and offers. This “pull” dynamic is perhaps not as romantic or celebrated; but it merits more attention, as does the interplay between the two. For example, the relocated executive (Appendix E, Story 1) derived satisfaction from refusing the home office’s attempt to bring her back to the U.S. Her bosses had seen the dire circumstances, including death threats, first hand. Naturally she had won their full attention; and she used this spotlight to prove her mettle to them--and to herself. The triumph was sweeter with a captive audience at the top of the company and her life hanging in the balance. We repeat that this interviewee answered our question with this one story and said everything else paled in comparison. This is strong emphasis to say the least, and it provokes reflection on how and why an individual makes or finds an experience so very meaningful. We hope that this research stimulates individuals to reflect not only on their meaningful experiences but also on the basis of this significance.

Our study has several limitations. It had strict geographic boundaries, the San Francisco Bay Area. This location brought an inherent set of story lines and a selection bias, in particular having to do with startups and Silicon Valley. We focused on the trajectory of becoming and being CEO. Future studies could examine the experiences of multiple-tenure CEOs and long-term CEOs in particular. Midway through the study, we observed that our sample included four distinct types of CEO: “home-grown,” those who, like the interviewee in Appendix D, move up in the same company to become CEO or President (8); owners or founders who stayed with and grew their companies over the long term (6); serial entrepreneurs (2); and CEOs who move up in one or more companies to become CEO of another company (14). We also identified CEOs who self-identified as turnaround experts. We conclude that each one of these specialties and pathways merit scrutiny. In particular, we recommend a focus on turnarounds and turnaround CEOs because of the economic stakes. Startups receive a great deal of attention, but turnarounds are more important because existing as well as new jobs are at stake. If the key challenge for organization is endurance (Barnard, 1968 [1938]: 253), and a key challenge for leadership is reliability and endurance (Barnard, 1968 [1938]: 274-275, 278), then research into the leadership of turnarounds promises the highest return.

To make meaning of one’s experience is to prove leadership of one’s life. The structures and exemplars we have shown are not only methods for practicing discursive leadership but also for leadership in the broadest sense.

## **Appendix A**

### **Bold Statements**

Every time there was an assignment outside of my comfort zone, I volunteered for it.

An important part of who I am is I feel like anything worth doing is worth doing well. I just wanted to do a great job, make every job better for having been there. Looking back, that is exactly what created the opportunity for me.

The advice I got was that I should always endeavor to learn about everything happening around me and not get complacent in the role I am currently in. I took that to heart.

My secret sauce is that I love multigenerational teams.

I have worked for tons of people who are disorganized and chaotic. I just watch, and I do the opposite of what I see. I just collect over all my years of what works.

I have accelerated so fast because I said yes to troubled jobs. I have no fear. When I am given what I am given [failing businesses], people get out of my way. You don't need a yes person in a mess. And I am fine doing it my way. I don't have any of that obsequiousness.

I always surrounded myself with people who had higher expectations.

I loved the company and the opportunities. The world just opened up for me. At first it was the money. Then once you are comfortable, it is not about that. It is about doing what you love to do. What motivates you to work hard. And it was more that I like the people I work with.

I have spent my whole career being underestimated and overdelivering.

In business, you have relationships. I had none of those. So I built this business with the case studies I read in Inc. Magazine and Fast Company every month for the last 20 years. A lot of what made us successful, that is 100% how we learned.

I never had a lot of mentors but I had a lot of examples.

I had a boss who every time you saw someone leaving her office, they were either in tears or angry. I saved some of her voice messages because they were so brutal. I said, "If I ever get the chance to be in her shoes, I will never, ever act like this."

The whole notion of being in service to others is foundational. I fell in love with that idea of being in service and it informed everything from that point on.

I realized people were interested in what I had to say and thought I had a good personality. I have always wanted to be around people and influence and articulate a point of view. I seemed to have the attributes that people responded to and would listen to, and I liked group work and helping people sort through issues and problems.

I always wanted to be that person to help the light go on with students, and I loved being a teacher. This company is a very sophisticated manifestation of the lessons I learned in the motivation for teaching. As a leader, I have to ensure that this company will live on in the future. That means developing people and sharing the gifts and knowledge we have with other individuals and motivating people to be the best you can be.

I developed a desire, I just wanted to be liked and I wanted to get positive affirmation. This is what drove me, positive affirmation and to be liked. I also learned that the harder I worked, if it was studying and homework, etc., the better my outcomes were, which helped with the affirmation. I also learned how to think through what would happen. I could plan better. It was this whole thing, what do I want to have happen and how do I get there.

I have tried different pathways. I have been looking for where change happens. I have been trying to build that bridge [between service and moneymaking] ever since.

## Appendix B “Breaking the Fabric”

| Event   | Interpretation   |
|---|--|
| I am from the Midwest   | The path looks like an upward spiral   |
| My dad died when I was five   | I have resilience  |
| It was a blue-collar, hard-working community  | I have been on my own a long time  |
| You are always around people whose stories are so deep and rooted in overcoming significant odds  | Whatever happens to you, you can never have a bad day  |
| It was the Depression   |  |
| My mom was too poor to go to college  |  |
| My dad had to take care of his father who was ill   |  |
| Then there is my own tragedy  |  |
| Plus I was brought up by stoic people   |  |
| They worked in the steel mills so you could go to college   | The goal was to break the fabric   |
| My grandfather came to this country in 1820   |  |
| He founded a Methodist colony   |  |
| There were 2 kinds of people, eastern Europeans fleeing world war and southerners migrating north |  |
| No one discouraged me from being smart  | Doing better than your parents was super important   |
| A congenital heart defect killed my father  | I wanted to be a microbiologist and help find a cure   |
| My brother has it too   |  |
| My father had his first heart attack playing football   |  |
| He became a coach   |  |
| He insisted that every one of his students go to college and graduate                             | He pushed them hard  |
| A man told me my dad threw him off the team for smoking   |  |
| That man owns his own company now   |  |
| They wrote to him, I have a box of letters  | No matter what I do, I will not have the impact he had on others                               |
| My grandfather rallied the community  |  |
| They picked us up when my dad died  |  |
| My grandparents got my mom a job  |  |
| My mom was a single mom when there were no single moms raising kids                               |  |
| She got paid less than the men even though she was raising kids                                   | I also take that as foundational, how do I make sure I am an enabler, and unstick the pipeline |



If you got married, you had to quit your job

I finished college and got married  
We moved to Texas to follow the jobs  
I did epidemiological research in a lab  
I sat in an office a fourth the size of this calling  
people and making entries on charts  
The doctor I worked for says,  
“Use a 200-ml glass”

My husband got transferred to Iowa  
I tried to get my Ph.D.  
I switched to an MBA  
I got 7 offers  
I saw an ad for a chemical manager at an auto factory  
Suppliers were leaving high-cost labor shops  
This was the first wave moving to the Midwest  
My interview was Monday and I started Friday  
I became their first woman plant manager  
I got their fastest quality certification ever  
I got valuable P & L experience  
They had said I did not understand the company  
I said, “I will leave if you do not make me plant manager”  
They said they had no job available  
They knew I was interviewing  
A job appeared and they made me plant manager

I went from education to lifelong learning  
I met [corporate women executives]  
I was a woman in a Japanese company

I was 51  
I had a job offer for a traditional job plus  
The offer to come to Silicon Valley  
I am the breadwinner, I have a husband and  
two school-age kids

I saw women having to make these choices  
that were truly unfair  
I want to bring that to the C-suite  
and be a role model  
I also went through the quota system, the  
token-woman system in the ‘80s and ‘90s

I thought I was going to lose my mind

I could not believe it. He is telling me what  
glass to use? Are you kidding me? I cannot  
do this. I am smarter than this. And this is  
not rewarding  
I thought my life was over

Did I put up with too much? Yes, but it  
wasn’t more than my great-grandmother  
had done  
I had to start at the bottom again  
They taught me the informal systems  
I hit a glass ceiling  
At that point in my life it wasn’t worth the  
energy to fight

I knew that Silicon Valley only calls once  
and they only call young people  
It was a financial risk

I played out all the scenarios  
I had to step back and learn the new culture

Everybody is a Ph.D. and they don't use the title  
I am learning chemistry and physics

I have 100 relatives in a 30-mile radius

My mother was embarrassed about our  
financial situation and would not fill out the forms  
I could not pay for college  
I was wearing old clothes  
My niece is in college  
I told her, "I don't want to say negative  
things, but you are from an underserved  
situation, you don't have the resources that  
a lot of kids have"

If I didn't do it I would never know  
I have to convince everyone here that I  
know what I am doing

I am overly humble sometimes  
It's a Midwestern thing  
They were not risk takers  
I took the demeanor and decorum, how to  
behave in the Midwest, and add innovation  
and risk on top of that  
I took this risk and came here  
To stay here, I have to go back to the  
roots of resilience and hard work  
That is what will keep me here and help  
me succeed  
I love the values of the midwest but I  
don't love the not-willing-to-change part  
The victory is not just taking the factories  
but also the research centers

Those things are part of where I am today

I feel very much that I need to give back  
and be a representative for bettering yourself

If I say out loud where I am from, maybe  
I can inspire people  
People like me who got to this role, we have  
to tell our true story

## Appendix C

### “Moving to the Center of the Action”

| Event  | Interpretation   |
|--|--|
| I was in class with kids 2 years older   | I had to be on top<br>On my father's side, they always emphasized the importance of being the first and the best   |
| My father managed companies in Senegal   | I saw extreme poverty that influenced me. I saw the importance of elevating yourself from being a victim of the environment<br>I went to a good boarding school<br>I was lucky to be there<br>We studied nonstop and the fathers themselves were very driven   |
| I went to a top business school in France<br>My mentor told me to start as a sales rep | I knew it was short term, just to learn the ropes<br>I did not like having to wait to see doctors but it did help me in my career later, persuasion and dealing with frustration<br>If you start at the bottom, no one can say you did not earn it   |
| I was promoted to management   | You are in a big organization<br>How do you get noticed?<br>I had to be involved in the core of the action of the business, products that were important for the future of the company   |
| I came to the US for my MBA  | That was propelling my career<br>90% of my French classmates were content with their education<br>The U.S. was fascinating   |
| [Went back to previous company in France]  | I was still trying to be in the core of the action<br>In France, people end up in high positions based on the school they went to and I didn't like that<br>However good you are, it is always what school you went to<br>[In the U.S.] you have to deliver<br>I never take for granted that I am going to keep this job |

The company's biggest product was in Europe  
The U.S. team asked me to present how we launched it  
They asked me to launch it in the U.S.

They had a territory available in Silicon Valley  
I was promoted every year, doing great

I was 3 levels down from the CEO

It turned out I was right  
They asked me to help get it approved  
I went to Genentech  
They needed a product manager

It was supposed to do \$400 million in year 1  
Then the company was bought out  
I was approached to go back east  
to launch a new product

Then I was involved in another product

A headhunter contacted me  
I took an offer from a small startup

[Negative test results had been suppressed]  
I took the product off the market

[Went to lead another startup]

[Went to lead another startup]

It is a recipe for disaster

I wanted to be a salesperson first  
I jumped on that  
Whenever I feel too comfortable,  
that is when I say, I have to try  
something new  
I stuck my neck out and wrote him  
A memo saying the FDA will turn us  
down and I explained why  
It's probably why I got the VP job  
I worked with an amazing oncologist  
They were the first leading biotech  
They had the first potentially big  
recombinant DNA product  
I was surrounded by smart people  
We were extremely visible  
Wall Street was all excited about it  
The expectations were crazy

It was my first big job, VP of sales  
and marketing, and the product  
would make or break the company  
I got dissatisfied  
I was too far from the front line  
They had almost no revenues  
But I wanted to be top dog  
It turned out to be the most important  
move of my career  
In adversity, you learn more  
If you want it bad, you get it bad

I am not going to do something  
unethical  
I had to fire the chairman of the  
board and do desperate financing  
We saved the company  
The least interesting part of my  
career. The board wanted to move  
into health care but did not have the  
culture and the guts for that

People said, “Why are you doing this?”

[Recent challenge: decision to sell a new drug outside the U.S.]

85% of our sales are outside the U.S.

There were good assets in the company, it just needed to be properly managed  
Having seen hell at the other company helped me see the major things that needed to be done, and I got the importance of doing it fast  
Probably one of the best decisions I ever made. There was nothing international in the company and I wanted to launch worldwide. Most boards would say don’t do it. But they trusted me and gave me free reign

If we had not made that decision, we would not be an independent company today

I was also helped by my worldwide experience and living outside the western world for much of my life

## Appendix D

### “I am a home-grown CEO, I have to prove myself every day”

| Event  | Interpretation  |
|--|---|
| One day the CEO told me I'd be the next CEO<br>“I will be your mentor, we will have lunch every day,<br>and you will take over in two years”   | I have confidence in my skills<br>I think maybe I was the best<br>candidate working here at the time<br>I went to a really good high school<br>and got good grades<br>The Franciscans were tough<br>The nuns were loving but fierce<br>The level they taught at was so high<br>You didn't not learn, and you<br>learned how to like to learn<br>I swear, part of it was you were not<br>there to do anything else but learn |
| I can still recite Shakespeare   |   |
| The CEO was not computer literate<br>He wanted to make everything himself<br>The machines cost \$100,000<br>He came at it from the standpoint of being broke<br>I came at it from the standpoint of safety<br>One guy lost his hand<br>Another guy caught on fire                      | I came at it from the long term<br>and safety, people were getting hurt<br><br><br><br><br><br>The long term approach, I am<br>confused that we don't think about<br>it more  |
| I was just in Switzerland looking at<br>their machines   | The people are brilliant<br>Americans have lost it<br>We won't build a big factory if the<br>payback is 20 years  |
| The CEO and I argued constantly about change<br>I became next CEO  | It was not a big change, I had really<br>good people working for me<br>I was intrigued by it  |
| At a trade show, I saw a new molding machine<br>There was no oil in it, only electric<br>There's no big hydraulic pump<br>It uses 60% less electricity<br>It was so precise it made a bad mold look good<br>We were the first company locally and maybe<br>even in the state to buy it | This machine was amazing  |
| [Head engineer disliked travel so did not attend show]<br>I told him we bought it  |   |

He said, "You can't do that, I'm the engineer"  
I said, "But I am the CEO. We have a 6-month warranty and we can take it back"

[In his early 20's he hitchhiked around the world]

30% of our sales are overseas, to 57 countries  
I travel a lot  
He hitchhiked in China when his cab did not  
Show up at the airport

Investors (oil men) from TX did not want solar energy  
We had to buy the building first

They were skeptical  
I told them, "Sign this piece of paper, and if anything happens to you, your kids will get another \$25,000 a month"  
Now they are telling their other companies to go solar  
They did not want me to put in a sterilizer  
It saved us \$500,000 a year  
We own 16 acres and a 3000-panel solar system

[Current challenge: changing compensation]

You had to travel to understand what you had and what the possibilities were

I fly coach, I have no entourage  
I take chances

A lot of companies don't like to own buildings

I put everything in terms of P & L that's how I convince them  
Even if somebody buys us, it would be stupid to move to Mexico or China

It's a safe, long-term environment for employees after I'm gone  
It would be very hard to unwind this company

I am a home-grown president, I have to prove myself more than a person coming in from a larger company with more experience

I prove myself every day. I have to sell my ideas to my staff. Maybe it is a problem with our culture that public companies change leadership often. I am blessed with not having to deal with the stock market.

The goal is not to pay people as little as possible, but to pay them enough that they have a life and can keep on working here. The lower paid

We just did raises  
It was a flat \$1-a-year raise for everyone

person is just as valuable as the  
higher paid person

I had to convince the 50 people who  
are making good money  
If there is a lot of turnover in the  
low-level jobs, our quality would  
suffer. It's bad for the long term

The least understood thing is caring  
about your people, otherwise they  
won't work for you. I want people  
to truly believe that I am doing the  
best I can for them and for myself  
and for the company

You guys [at the university] have  
influence over future leaders and it is  
important that you figure this out. I  
like to think that future leaders will  
be better leaders. That is why I am  
doing this [interview]



## **Appendix E**

### **Signature Stories**

Story 1. [President of large division of large corporation.] I was plucked from my environment, put down cold in the Philippines. You have to say, “OK, what do I do now.” You have to be purposeful. I was given a direct sales manager job for our locations in the Philippines. They never had women in P and L there. They love women, but the women are the boss in the home, not at work. I am an American, they do not want me there. They thought I was a spy. There is a love-hate relationship with the U.S., there is a long history. Our bases had been kicked out. The younger people feel they never would have been invaded. They cut my territory in half, it was half the job I was told I would get. I felt I had gone back in time 25 years or more. “Oh, I have made a big mistake coming here.” Then I got mad. “They think I cannot do this. I will show them I can.” That forced me to figure out how I was going to rally my team. I made decisions. I backed up my people. I wasn’t corrupt. I took locations away from our dealers that were not buying our product. We caught them redhanded. I took away those franchises. They were legally supposed to buy from us but they were buying cheaper products. It was super corrupt. My people told me when I got there, “Oh my god, you make decisions. Nobody here wants to rock the boat.” It is a very collegial culture, go along, get along. Our business was really suffering. When you hold the line, enforce the contracts, just to what you are supposed to be doing and you will get different results. I got death threats. I varied my path to work, and I got corporate security involved. We outperformed every district. I will tell you, the people I worked with, they are the nicest people I have ever met, but they had a system that had weighed down the whole business.

About six months after I was there, a couple of executives came over and saw what I was doing. “Oh my god, we did not know what we were doing when we sent you here.” They wanted to bring me back. The whole environment, the corruption, the animosity, spy, woman [ticks off list on her fingers].

I remember thinking, Why am I being tested in a way that not everyone else is being tested? Then I changed my thinking to, what a unique opportunity. I am getting experiences that nobody else is getting. I am a fairly optimistic person by nature. It is not “I don’t like it.” I won’t waste my time and energy doing it, and early on I found myself experiencing that I am not going to be miserable. I will do this well. I knew it was temporary, and there was an end in sight.

Story 2. [CEO of a hospital.] We had a physician on staff who sat on our system-level board, he sat on a group that oversaw me and was also very good friends with the chief of staff of my hospital who I had a good working relationship with as well. He was the physician who is accountable for complying with staff and on a board with authority over all that we were doing. He had a past record and reputation of not being a good citizen, whether it was interaction with staff, or showing up in the hospital under the influence. He had been coddled to because of his high position on the board. I had been in the CEO role for about four or five months. He showed up in the operating room intoxicated and I got a call and I said, “Have him do a drug test and go home. He cannot do surgery.” I said, “Let me talk to the chief of staff.” I called the chief of staff and said, “Here is what is going on. He smells like he has been drinking. Can you help me get another surgeon?” The next day, the suspect surgeon comes into my office and closes the door and says, “I am going to have your butt fired and I have been treated so unfairly.”

I said, "I am here to protect the patients and from those posing a risk to them." As CEO, I had the ability to suspend him until the committee had the chance to review all the facts. Let's see who is right or wrong. My boss called me and said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Do you want me to let docs operate on people while intoxicated?" He said, "It will be hard to get proof. You need to let this go." I said, "I cannot do that. I have to protect the patients. If you cannot support me on this, why are we here?" He was a good guy but he could not deal with stress. The medical committee upheld the suspension, required some remedial education for the physician, and the medical executive committee complimented me and said "It's about time somebody had the backbone to do this because it's been going on for a number of years."

Story 3. [CEO of midsize manufacturing company.] We were at an offsite training and I had a fever. We had a moderator, and we were going around the table. People were offering opinions. We were a \$10-million company losing \$1 million a year. This was early in my career. I had this fever. He [the CEO] was sitting across from me. I could see people shaking their heads, "No," at what he was saying. Pardon my language, I said, "That is the stupidest f\*\*\*ing idea." They said I used the "f" word 20 times. The moderator called a time out and sent me out of the room. The moderator said I should go home. They all said I should go home. On the way home, I said, "I have lost my job." I had a child, a baby. I was annoyed with myself for losing control. On Monday morning, I went to his office to apologize and get my last check. He said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "After you left, we had a really honest conversation and everybody convinced me that you were 100% right. Just go back to work. We will build our own machines." The machines were \$100,000 each and he came at it from the perspective of being broke. And I was coming at it from the point of the long term. Better for the company to hire people to run the machines and nobody getting hurt.

Story 4. [Serial entrepreneur.] I was in my early 20's, brash and intolerant. It was my lesson in tolerance. I worked for the South African National Antarctic exposition. They choose ten people. You are dropped into a base that's 60 feet underground. Then you get left with food and water for a year and two months. They come back 14 months later to retrieve you. You do research and you leave the base. Upper atmospheric physics was my project. The aurora borealis. I lay on my back at night and took photos. You walk up and back to your hut in total darkness. We lost two guys. You can't get them back, you bury them in the snow and retrieve them later. People come from all walks of life. You run it as a group or you do not make it. If there is anger, you may not drink water the next day. The hardest thing was getting along with people. There were extreme views in South Africa in 1981. Ultra right, ultra left. You would get into arguments that raged for weeks.

## **Appendix F**

### **Proof Units--Childhood and Adolescence**

To be in the grandstands at the parade and see my grandmother sitting in the car and waving, my mouth was wide open. I was very impressed. I saw this incredible respect and influence that she had on other people.

The early experiences with my family [of 10, single-parent] helped me build leadership muscle.

It became evident at a young age that you had to be there and give the best service, if not, a chain store would get the business. Being fair, firm, honest, open, and trusting—that is what I saw in [my father's] dealings and how I embarked.

I grew up on a small farm, poor, in eastern Oregon. I do not remember a time I did not have a chore list. There was always work to be done. I developed a work ethic at an early age.

As a young girl, I saw someone who had an amazing work ethic. He did not lead with his ego. You see some of those CEOs now with their millions of dollars a year in salary and their airplanes. For him it was about doing what was right for the company. I am extremely grateful to him. Fathers did not always invest in their daughters. He believed in education. I have been on my own a long time, but I had the foundation set.

My grandfather and my father significantly improved their condition through very hard work, through hard studies, valuing effort and the need to manage your own life. They went to top schools and they emphasized the importance of being the first and the best. They were very demanding in terms of the results I would get in school. They were not the same with my brother and sister. For whatever reason, they may have had more influence on me.

I was very fortunate to be associated with either successful African American men or men who were not successful in professional life but had a lot of wisdom, were well studied and passionate about what they believed in. So I would say those two perspectives influenced my thought process to where I am today.

My dad and the culture at the time were chauvinistic. When people tell me I can't do something, that drives me. "I will show you."

The expectation was to get married, move three doors down, and take care of my parents. Don't go to college, don't swim out too far. I wanted that ability to know there was something else.

My parents had two children after my two younger sisters, but they did not survive. The last one was a boy, which was sad for my dad. I think I was the boy he never had.

It was a challenging upbringing. There were 9 of us kids and sometimes the factories would shut down. My whole community was African Americans who moved up north to make a better living. I was bussed 8 miles away to an upper middle class school but I grew up in an environment that was very underserved. I can remember us being on welfare. I saw my mother

suffering, and being on and off welfare, and the implications of that. But one of the things is that faith and education was something that my parents instilled in all of us. I quickly learned that if I was going to get out of this community and help my mother out, I needed a good education. I applied myself. I got involved in everything. Being engaged was very important to me at an early age.

My mom and dad married when they were 19. They divorced when I was 3. Dad got custody, and she was ostracized by her family. I saw her put herself through college and then grad school. Whatever she wanted, she accomplished it. I was a teenager watching her struggle. I need to be self reliant and have the confidence to do things. That stays with me all the time.

My mother was the oldest of 12 and the first in her family to go to college and only one of four that achieved a college degree among her siblings. My dad was one of 14 and only two of them went to college. My great-grandfather came to Panama from Portugal to help build the canal. In 1833, Queen Victoria abolished slavery in the British colonies. So my ancestors were free men looking to make a living. It was never a question that my brother and I would come to the U.S. for college and we were going to graduate. That is what we grew up with, and I am so grateful they had that vision.

Where I grew up, an Afro-American male was not ostracized for studying. And I have always been willing to stand alone if I think I am right.

I was the only girl in my class that looked like me and there was only one other person in the whole school that I remember besides me. This was the early and mid-'60s and there is civil rights stuff going on and strife in our world. I became a target at that young age. What that taught me was, the odds are not in my favor. I was so young when I learned that.

## **Appendix G**

### **Proof Units--Early Adulthood and Work Experiences**

I realized that direct service work was not my forte. The people doing that work for 15 or 20 years, they developed a hardness to themselves because you were working with people with great chaos in their lives.

I did not have any good experiences with the leaders I was under. I decided to become a supervisor and work my way up. I had a boss who, every time I saw someone leaving her office, they were either in tears or angry. I saved some of her voice messages because they were brutal. I said, "If I ever get the chance to be in her shoes, I will never act like this."

I got tired of being laid off. The only security is when you do for yourself, that's the one thing you learn in the U.S. They hire you, they fire you.

I did not know what I was doing. It was an incredible learning experience because Europe was a bit behind with regard to viewing women in management. It was the first opportunity to see the discrimination men had towards women and learn how to navigate that, not with anger but better and smarter and learning that they have this attitude. It actually gave me a leg up in the conversation.

It was important that I decided to start from the bottom. No one could say I did not earn it.

The big reason [for job change] was, that I was always one that thought there should be a correlation. People should try to work as hard as they can, and compensation should be correlated with that. It is not sitting at your chair from 9 to 5.

They asked me to be a salesperson. It was a classic decision. Did I want to be very narrow and very deep, or get a broader perspective from selling to many different industries? I said, "I am going to take the leap and try it."

I was supposed to be a police officer. I had my spot in the academy and everything. Then I stepped back and looked at my father's life and said, "I am not going to go to the academy."

You cannot see voice and data networks. You can't taste or feel or imagine it. There is no story, there is no there there. I wanted to sell a product people could experience.

My thinking was all on the nonprofit side. I talked with [a colleague] about career. He said, "There are a lot of us like-minded people in nonprofits. Go to the other side." I had thought business was bad. I had also worked in government. I thought, "Change doesn't happen here in a way I want to make impact." Then I ran into this man, and I have been trying to build that bridge ever since.

In an interview, they asked about my career goals. I had just finished grad school. I audaciously said, "Before I turn 40, I want to be CEO of a hospital." It seemed like a reasonable goal to me. After that, I couldn't take it back. I put it out there and I couldn't take it back.

I wanted to go away to school and I did. I wanted my freedom. I enjoyed it to a point where I was kicked out of school. Then I became pregnant and went home and decided, “That’s it for me.” I needed to grow up. I decided to change the trajectory of my life.

Berkeley was a pivotal moment. I could not have done all these other things without Berkeley. My grad school was a moratorium and a rethinking. I took out loans, saved money, and focused those two years on my learning and on my peers in that program. Everyone had worked and we learned from each other.

About two years into the job, my boss came into my office and said, “I just fired the director of communications and you will be the next director.” The next Monday I was running a team of 8 people doing something I had no content knowledge of. I am a utility player, that is my strength. I had board members who were communications executives and I had to overcome their saying, “Why is she doing this, she is only 25?” I had to have a heart to heart. “Well, [boss] did pick me for this job. I need your help.” They helped me a lot. They took me under their wing. I learned from the content expertise of my team.

## **Appendix H**

### **Proof Units--Midcareer**

In my early 40's, I decided to go back to school and get my MBA. I had been running [small nonprofit] for 20 years. I did not want to be the CEO that did not continue to challenge myself. I had lots of accolades and examples of success but I was hungry for something and part of what I wanted to do was find an opportunity that had a social impact to it, and I was curious about not working at a nonprofit. It was a mission that was bold and crazy and entrepreneurial and I knew how hard that would be. I said, "All right, this sounds like fun." It was about learning the brain skills I got from the MBA, it was about challenging myself, and it was something I felt strongly about. A good leader has to challenge himself. I was hungry to challenge myself.

My role started to become more sales. I was not loving that. I missed the people development. I love to develop a great team. And ultimately I felt I was working for shareholders. I was a shareholder. But I missed the community aspect that I had running the nonprofit. I was going to turn 50 and this opportunity came up here and there was something about the business, the environment, and the people that brought me back to that triple bottom line role.

I just thought, I will become a supervisor. Then I thought, Wow, but I want to do more. They were constructing a new hospital in a different territory and I thought "This is exciting." I was happy in the job I had but they sought me out. If they did, I thought, maybe they see something I could do.

One day the CEO took me to lunch and he told me I would be the next president. I was surprised. I said, "Are you joking?" He said, "I will be your mentor. We will have lunch every day. You will take over in two years."

You are in low-level management in a big organization and you are not recognized. How do you get noticed? Stick your neck out and take some risks. I wrote a memo where I stuck my neck out. A five-page memo to the CEO. I was three levels down. I said, "The FDA will turn us down again" and I said why and I was right.

It was a higher pay position but it was not as glamorous. The thing was, we really needed someone to restructure [marketing]. It had been neglected. I thought it was not a typical career move, not up, but in a different department. I learned afterward how valuable that experience was in helping me so I could eventually take over all of marketing. Thinking of the big picture and the long term. You got to understand the whole organization.

I learned what was good about [company he left]. The people at [new company] did not have the same values. There were some really sleazy people there trying to get away with things. Fool Wall Street and fool employees. I had to stand up very strong against that value system that was set there by just one or two people at the very top. In a small company, there is no big jury. I learned how important values were to me. It rubbed me wrong all the time. I learned to be tough and stand up for things even if it meant not being popular. I also learned there was a lot more creativity to be used in advertising or sales. It was an open-minded environment where they would do anything.

I had always run stuff. I always had resources and line responsibilities. Every aspiring leader should be forced into two scenarios: lead with resources, I pay you and you do these three things. Then I had an assignment of working on the brand strategy. That is soft stuff. You don't have line authority. You are leading with vision, ideas, selling. I started with this vision and built on that, and ended with the whole organization galvanized around one word [company slogan]. Now I look at this organization much more through the brand lens than the organizational lens. The brand lens answers who we are, the organization lens answers what we do. That is the big lesson for me. When I did things through the organization, I was focused on what we do. But that is not who we are. The organization speaks to transactions, the brand speaks to experiences that people have.

We had been in business 17 years and we lost our biggest account. A million dollars fell out of the checkbook. [Partner] and I said, "We have to pivot." Here we are in Pioneer Square in Portland. She is drinking espresso and me a mocha. She is telling me the nuances and the taste profile. I did not care if I sell boxes, I want my own business. You love coffee and I love business, let's go for it.

Most of the executives left after the acquisition. I stayed. I had the option to leave, golden parachute, but I decided I would ride it out and get to know the new company. I was one of the top leaders remaining after the acquisition. They asked me to do the first company presentation at the shareholder meeting that year. They were worried. I had not been exposed to investors. They had me come out for two weeks and practice, practice, practice. This is what you can and cannot say to investors. What was funny about the process is, I got to know the CFO, CEO, head of investor relations, all the top people at the acquiring company. After this two week intensive training, I knew all of them and had this exposure I never would have gotten. That was a great opportunity.

As we were integrating, I learned we had licensed a technology and nobody was doing anything with it. I went to my boss and said, "This technology is amazing, let's look at this." He said, "Great, do you want to do that?" I said yes. We formed a team and investigated what this technology would mean. We presented to the board, and they agreed it should be funded and set up as an autonomous business. My boss said, "Would you be interested in heading it up?" I said yes. He said, "You are answering too fast. You need to think really hard, think really hard, how you will deal with it if it fails. How are you going to deal with all this visibility if it fails." I laughed. I could not care less. It was not in my DNA to think that way. But the one thing big companies breed is risk adversity. People survive because they never take risks. That was my launching pad.

I was asked to submit my resignation. No explanation was given. I had been doing a good job. I felt betrayed. But a lot of good people reached out and did things. It was just a matter of a couple of weeks and I had job offers. I was still mulling over what happened. "It wasn't anything you did, he wanted to make a change." People always knew of my potential and that I would be successful. It was a setback, but I believe in second chances. I was not going to let it define me. And the people I thought would come to my rescue did not, and the ones I did not expect, did.



So here is the epiphany. I was really struggling financially. We found a cheap dive in [city], one of the worst experiences in my life. My wife had a legal background. She said, “I will be your secretary. At night, you take care of the baby and I will go to the office and do the books.” She was begging and crying at night. “You have to get another job so we can live.” And I remember it (points to a direction) right there at that intersection, I pulled up. A Fedex truck was coming the other way and I said, “That guy is making more money than I am, and he can sit back and have a beer at the end of the day and I can’t.” I said, “This is going to be the turning point.”

I came in as a financial turnaround CFO. I did not have turnaround experience but I could hit the ground running. I knew the business. I was really butting heads with the COO. He was a prior CEO. I had an executive coach that helped me get past the need to be right about the outcome and focus more on how we get to the outcome. We devised a strategy whereby I would take the COO out to lunch at his favorite restaurant and be empathetic. “I know this is hard for you. I know you had been CEO.” I spent the whole time being empathetic. That took a lot. I was desperate. I was being different than what I had been. In the end, he became my number one supporter. Empathy is a hard thing, and it is critical for a CEO because it isn’t about the results you are achieving, it is about what you are able to achieve through others.

## **Appendix I**

### **Proof Units--Formal Top Leadership**

#### Experiences leading up to the office

[CEO of family business.] There is always this thought of, When are you ready to take the next step? But no one else can tell you that you are ready. I saw my dad who was the president and CEO with his attention on other things. He was at the latter part of his career, and I felt I could be doing more. I sensed a void of leadership that I felt was natural for me to fill. I made a presentation to the board saying I was ready. Maybe it was earlier than other people thought, but it felt like the right time to me and to the organization.

I was happy where I was and then one day I was working late. There was a newspaper on my desk and I saw an ad for executive director for [animal-services agency]. I always loved animals and I had supported the agency for a long time. Anyhow, not because I thought I would get the job, but I applied, I would love an interview. I wanted to understand what they were looking for so ten years down the road this would be something I could do. [She applied and got the job.]

[The CEO made him President.] There was no question that [CEO] had something on his mind. I knew the stats were not good for the President to become CEO. I called my mentor and asked for advice. He said, "It is very simple. Do your job and do not ever think you are the CEO. Your job as President is to carry out the wishes of the CEO and do not forget that, even if you think you are smarter. Just remember you are not the CEO." It was the best advice I could have gotten. He put me in my place. And if you want to screw up for sure, forget this.

During the interview process with the board, the exit decision came up. [Company was deliberating leaving a market.] The board discovered I had a different point of view from [CEO's]. The board decided not to exit. The CEO didn't want to, and I did want to. [CEO] had a different view, and he had a valid reason. My view was that it was the fifth or sixth excuse for not exiting. When I was being interviewed for CEO, what came in question was the board, as I learned, had some frustrations with management for hanging onto that market, and somewhere in the past conversations that the CEO had with the board it may have come across that my view was the same as his. The board said, "We would have benefitted from that perspective." I said [CEO's] decision was valuable. In the end, the board agreed with me because they had me exit that market before he left. The last thing you want the new CEO to do is to come on board and exit a market. [CEO] agreed. The final outcome came out right, and I felt that I was loyal to [CEO] because he was the CEO. I think the board would have thought differently if I had played behind-the-scenes politics with them. When they asked me, naturally I am going to tell the truth. It was not throwing [CEO] under the bus.

A search firm called me about a CEO position. "Do us a favor, just go talk to them." The company was losing a million dollars a day and the three years prior to when I came, they had lost over a billion dollars. I had done some research and came in with a twelve-point plan for them. I was not serious about taking the position. I thought it was interesting and would be fascinating to learn how an organization that was one of the most significant in the industry, how do they fall into this position. I thought, to pay my way out there, they should have this plan. I

fell in love with them. I told my wife I was very impressed with the organization. But we had just built our dream home. The recruiter called when I got back and said, “They want to know if you will entertain the position.” My daughter was a junior in high school. The timing was not good. When we flew back, my wife said, “I know that look in your eye. Tell me we are not going to be moving.” I said, “I think I can help them.” I have always liked challenges. At [other company] my claim to fame was markets that had been what they called the graveyard. What made me decide was the magnitude of the challenge. All my friends told me I should not take this job. Why do you want to work that hard? It looked complex from the outside, but it just needed a few things. I figured, if I could help an organization of this size and magnitude turn the corner, it would be very rewarding for me personally but most importantly there were more than 60,000 people whose lives and families’ lives depended on it. And I just loved the challenge. I never doubted that it could be done. My philosophy is, there are no bad markets, just bad management.

Headhunters were calling me all the time. I interviewed for a president role and in the process interviewed with [top VC firm] for one of their companies. I had no idea who these people were, it turned out one of them was the godfather of biotech. The headhunter called and said, “They love you.” I said, “I don’t love the company.” She said, “People would die to take a CEO role for these VCs. Don’t pass up an opportunity. Go for a second interview.” I came out for that and told them I was not interested in the company. They said, “We have all sorts of things you might be interested in.” They had [current company she is CEO of]. It was perfect for me. I got on a 6 a.m. flight in Miami and flew to Silicon Valley from Monday to Thursday for three months. I did deep research, worked with a team, and we finalized the business plan. They wanted a presentation. The audience was all the cream of the crop. I had no idea and probably would have been intimidated if I had known. It was lots of fun and it took all of the partners to get funded, \$7 million each. They asked me to be CEO. “Didn’t you know that we assumed you would be CEO?” I looked at them and said, “You’ve got to be kidding me. Does someone really assume they are going to be CEO?”

I knew Silicon Valley only calls once and they only call young people. Coming here was a once-in-a-lifetime shot. I played out all the scenarios. If I didn’t do it, I would never know.

### Experiences of taking and executing office

I am thinking, “I am so excited, I got my CEO job.” I knew it was a fixer-upper going in. It was early 2000’s, lots of CEOs were out of jobs. I am competing with many people who have already been CEOs. And I don’t look like the others [she is African-American] and I am not from Silicon Valley. They bring in people they know, no risk. They will take the risk with a B player. I had a friend come in and do due diligence. An engineer. OK, great, they have something that works. What I did not know, the a-ha moment: They had a 10-year lease for about \$1.2 million a quarter. It was ridiculous. We had only \$700 million in cash and all of a sudden more than half of that has to go to rent. I did not due-diligence the financials by having an engineer come in. They knew but they didn’t tell you. I found out later that these leases took a lot of those companies under.

I had to gain a perspective. Some things you do not have a perspective, and you say, “Either way, I do not really care.” I started thinking about what I really wanted to see, what was best for the company. I had to figure out what that was. Simple things that make a big impact, like the color of the racking in our stores. We have always had gray racking, and there was a discussion of changing it to brown. It is a million-dollar order. It is a big decision. Do we go with gray or brown? I had to ponder that. Sticking with gray is same-old, same-old; but the parts can work with the other stores. You go to brown and they won’t interchange with the other stores. It could potentially have a big impact if it did not look good. I decided to go with brown. My dad was part of this too; and he was kind of deferring to me too; but he was looking at me and saying, “Hey, it’s a million-dollar decision, get it right.” I was trying to tap into doing the best thing for the organization. That point of view, it is so critical because people keep asking your opinion and for direction, and that consistency. Before I had that point of view established in my head and my being, I felt a little indecisive or wishy-washy; and the clearer it became the more I was able to give clear directions.

If someone had told me with a crystal ball what was going to happen, I would never have taken it. But it was actually extremely good. In adversity, you learn more. If you want it bad, you get it bad. I became COO, becoming CEO six months later. We launch the first product, it becomes apparent that there were some negative studies on the drug that had not been communicated to the board or to the FDA. I had to alert the board and we had to take the product off the market. The company almost went bankrupt. We had to do desperate financing but we saved the company. It was a great experience in terms of focusing on the important things and moving fast. And ethics. There were a few board members trying to push me in the other direction, but no matter how difficult it was, it was the right thing. I am not going to do something unethical.

We worked with a coach, and she had us do an exercise. The whole leadership team forms a line. At one end, you say you are 100% responsible for your job and the other is zero. Line yourself up, how are you showing up in the organization? People are being honest. I put myself over 100% and some were less. The fact was, I was contributing to others doing less and it became about moving to this point of 100%, not more and not less. That was very vivid and made it real for me.

## Appendix J Study Demographics

| Interviewee Data* | Organization Data |                    |        |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------|
|                   | Sector            | Industry           | Size** |
| WM                | For-profit        | High tech          | Medium |
| WF                | Nonprofit         | Philanthropy       | Small  |
| WF                | Nonprofit         | Human services     | Small  |
| WF                | Nonprofit         | Health care        | Big    |
| WM                | Nonprofit         | Health care        | Medium |
| WM                | For-profit        | Manufacturing      | Small  |
| WM                | For-profit        | Retail             | Medium |
| WM                | For-profit        | Engineering        | Medium |
| WF                | Nonprofit         | Human services     | Small  |
| WM                | For-profit        | Pharmaceuticals    | Big    |
| WM                | For-profit        | High tech          | Big    |
| Af-Am, M          | Nonprofit         | Health care        | Big    |
| WF                | For-profit        | Biotech            | Small  |
| LM                | Nonprofit         | Banking            | Small  |
| WF                | For-profit        | Foods              | Small  |
| WF                | For-profit        | Diagnostics        | Small  |
| Af-Am, M          | Nonprofit         | Health care        | Big    |
| WF                | For-profit        | Foods              | Medium |
| WF                | For-profit        | Energy             | Small  |
| Af-Am, F          | Public            | Transportation     | Medium |
| WF                | For-profit        | Energy             | Big    |
| WM                | For-profit        | Financial services | Small  |
| WF                | For-profit        | Banking            | Big    |
| WF                | Nonprofit         | Insurance          | Big    |
| Af-Am, F          | For-profit        | Software           | Small  |
| WF                | For-profit        | Logistics          | Small  |
| WF                | For-profit        | Financial services | Big    |
| Af-Am, M          | Nonprofit         | Health care        | Big    |
| LF                | Nonprofit         | Human services     | Medium |
| As-Am, M          | Public            | Education          | Medium |

\*W = White; Af-Am = African-American; As-Am = Asian American; L = Latino/Latina  
M= Male; F = Female

\*\*Small = under \$100 million; Medium = \$100 million - \$1 billion; Big = over \$1 billion

Two interviewees were in their 40's. All other interviewees were in their 50's or 60's.  
Three interviewees held the title of president and one was COO. All others were CEOs.

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